A Pilgrimage of Hope:
William Morris’s Journey to Utopia*

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Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town,
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green.

William Morris, The Earthly Paradise (1868–70)

‘Pilgrimage is born of desire and belief. The desire is for solution to problems of all kinds that arise within the human situation. The belief is that somewhere beyond the known world there exists a power that can make right the difficulties that appear so insoluble and intractable here and now. All one must do is journey.’

Alan Morinis (1)

Romance and the Renewal of Utopia

MIQUEL ABENSOUR HAS, correctly in my view, noted a change in the character of utopia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The difference can be observed readily by comparing, say, Etienne Cabet’s Voyage en Icarie (1840) with such later works as Bulwer Lytton’s The Coming Race (1870), Richard Jefferies’s After London (1885), W.H. Hudson’s A Crystal Age (1887), and William Morris’s News from Nowhere (1890). Not only is there a new uneasiness, a growing sense of alarm that the future may not turn out to be the haven of peace and prosperity promised by the prophets of industrial progress. There is also a new way of writing utopias. The detailed description of the political, social and economic organization of the new society gives way more to an evocation of a mood. The expressive aspects of utopia come to take precedence over its “scientific” claims. This is shown particularly in the increasing importance attached to nature. Nature now takes its place alongside society. It is seen both as a foil and as a necessary complement to organized social life. At the same time it is also the source of many of the expressive qualities that now characterize utopia.¹

The older kind of utopia also persisted, of course. It was indeed one such, Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888), that provoked William
Morris to write News from Nowhere. Morris, was, like Bellamy, a socialist (though he called himself a Communist, just as Bellamy called himself a Nationalist). But he was appalled by Bellamy's vision of a soulless state socialism, where the apparent goal of life was a kind of licensed idleness. More to the point, Bellamy's "cockney paradise" was the result of a conception that was mechanical not simply in the form of life envisaged but in the form of expression in which it was conveyed. Looking Backward, said Morris, was cast in the form of "a romance"; but by Bellamy's own admission this was no more than "a sugar-coating to the pill." Bellamy wished to set out certain social and political ideas; he had no interest in exploring the resources of the romance as a literary form.²

It would have been inconceivable to Morris, with his background and outlook on literature, to write a utopia without attention to its literary form. Once more Bellamy was the inspiration—of how not to do it. Like Looking Backward, News from Nowhere is a romance—"some chapters from a utopian romance" is how the book's sub-title whimsically puts it. Unlike Looking Backward, it takes the form of the romance very seriously indeed. Morris came to the task formidably equipped, as one of the leading students of his day of the medieval romances. He had himself written two highly successful verse romances, The Life and Death of Jason (1867) and The Earthly Paradise (1868–70). He had also translated a number of the Old Norse sagas, and written Sigurd the Volsung (1876)—both of which he treated, as Edward Thompson remarks, essentially as exercises of the romantic imagination (187–190). Towards the end of his life he seemed to have become positively possessed by the prose romance, writing nearly a dozen between 1888 and his death in 1896. Chief among these were The House of the Wolfings (1888), The Roots of the Mountains (1888), The Well at the World's End (1892), The Wood Beyond the World (1894), The Water of the Wondrous Isles (1895), and The Sundering Flood (1896). It is well to remember that News from Nowhere (1890) belongs not just chronologically but, in important respects, semantically to this group.³

The romance is an adventure story, originally in verse but later more commonly in prose, dealing in themes of heroism, chivalry and love. It employs devices of the fantastic, the mythic and the miraculous. It privileges the imagination over actuality (a point stressed especially in its revival in nineteenth-century Romanticism). Frequently it tells of an heroic quest or a dangerous journey. Famous early examples are the Arthurian romances, such as Chrétien de Troyes's Lancelot and Perceval (second half of the 12th century), Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzifal (c.1210), and Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur (written 1470).⁴

I shall come back to the importance of the journey in Morris's utopian romance. First though it is the other feature of the romance, its expressive or imaginative character, which demands our attention. For it is this that distinguishes News from Nowhere as a utopia of the newer kind. Morris's notorious vagueness on such matters as the institutional arrangements of the new society are the consequence of a deliberate eschewing of the older utopian
mode, as practised by Bellamy. What Morris wishes to convey is the experience of being in a new world. "If I could but see a day of it," says the narrator fervently to himself on the eve of his awakening in the future society; "if I could but see it!" (News from Nowhere, 2). Morris makes us not just see it—and the visual is undoubtedly the predominant sense in News from Nowhere—but hear it, smell it, feel it. The description of people, clothes, buildings, gardens and, above all, nature, occupies a large part of the book. It is what stays with us after we may have forgotten the names, events and even arguments that figure there. Marie-Louise Berneri aptly remarks that News from Nowhere cannot be summarized or treated schematically: "it should be appreciated like a painting which must be viewed as a whole." Her comment on the appeal of Morris's utopia is equally to the point. "The persuasive charm of News from Nowhere does not reside so much in the admittedly convincing arguments put forward by its various utopian inhabitants to explain why they have chosen their manner of life, but in the atmosphere of beauty, freedom, calm and happiness which pervades the whole story" (259–60). G.D.H. Cole once wrote: "News from Nowhere was neither a prophecy nor a promise, but the expression of a personal preference. Morris was saying 'Here is the sort of society I feel I should like to live in. Now tell me yours'" (xvi). This seems to overdo the subjectivity somewhat. Morris was a Marxist, a point that was established to an almost excessive degree by Meier. He believed that socialism was the future of the world. News from Nowhere depicts a socialist society some two hundred years after the "revolution of 1952" that brought it into being. That revolution—bloody and protracted—is, unusually in a utopia, described in great detail, together with an account of both its general and particular causes. Morris was no determinist, and it seems clear that towards the end of his life he came to think that the socialist society was much further off than he had once hoped. But he never ceased to believe in both the possibility and the necessity of socialism. In that sense News from Nowhere does contain both a "prophecy" and "a promise." That surely is the implication of the famous last line of the book: "if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream."

Nevertheless, one knows what Cole means. News from Nowhere is characterized by a sense of intense longing, a highly personalized desire that emerges in the form of an eroticism that suffuses the entire account of the new society. This is undoubtedly a world that Morris personally hungered for. There are sufficient references to unhappy episodes in his own personal life to make the point more prosaically, were it not abundantly clear from the whole spirit of the text. In his review of Bellamy, Morris had observed: "The only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author" ("Looking Backward," 502). That temperament is to be reconstructed not only, and not mainly, from the formal proposals put forward in the utopia, but by its total feel: the casual details offered as asides, the hidden assumptions slipped in, the things that are left out. In Morris's own case what is casual in other utopias becomes highly
explicit and deliberate in his. It allows us to see how carefully he composed a picture of a society in which he would feel personally happy and fulfilled.

Subjectivity, imagination; the striving after the emotional rather than the scientifc truth of the good society—in all these ways News from Nowhere proclaims itself part of the new sensibility of utopia. It was a part, perhaps the major part, of a renewal of utopia that had begun in the 1870s (Kumar, “News from Nowhere”). With it, utopia opened up new fields for the imagination. Ironically the immediate beneficiary of this was the anti-utopia that began with the early Wells and continued in the first half of the twentieth century. But, in the second half of the century, the ecotopia and the feminist utopia have picked up the threads. They are the clearest descendants of the line that found its most attractive expression in News from Nowhere.7

Journeys, Pilgrimages and Utopia

All utopias involve journeys. At the very least the traveller to utopia has to get from here to there, in either a spatial or a temporal sense. More’s Utopia (1516) established the pattern; and the close correspondence between utopia, the imaginary journey, and the travel literature of the voyages of discovery makes the point equally well.8

Earlier utopian journeys were generally in space (terrestrial, sub-terrestrial or super-terrestrial); later ones in time. With the growth of future consciousness in western society from the eighteenth century onwards, it was more plausible to discover the good society at some future point in time than to happen upon it on some remote island or in a hidden mountain valley. In the hands of a Morris or Wells, with their evolutionary outlook, the temporal dimension plays a central role in the construction of their utopias (or anti-utopias). For many writers though the difference is mainly formal. Especially for recent utopias, where science and technology are downplayed, the fact that the utopias are generally set in the future does not seem to be very significant. Neither Ursula Le Guin’s The Dispossessed (1974) nor Ernest Callenbach’s Ecotopia (1975) really seem to require a future setting (though one sometimes thinks that, as with several feminist utopias, they would look more plausible in the past).

A more important distinction to be made is, if one might put it like this, phenomenological. It concerns, that is, the meaning to be attached to the journey. We can distinguish journeys according to the intent of the travellers, what they are trying to achieve, either for themselves or for others. The instrumentalities of the journey, whether it is done by pack-horse or air-balooon, by spaceship or time-machine, are of lesser importance. What matters is the meaning invested in the objects of the journeying, whether as means or ends.

On this basis, the utopian journey can best be compared to a pilgrimage. The medieval Christian idea of the pilgrimage, following Augustine, was of the People of God as aliens or exiles in history seeking a destination outside history. More specifically, life could be conceived as a pilgrimage, a
journey through earthly time that culminated in the soul’s reunion with God. One special life, that of Christ’s, was widely regarded as the model of the pilgrimage: the pilgrim imitated Christ’s journey on earth, up to and including the journey along the via crucis. The “imitation of Christ” involved a movement from the human to the divine. Concretely, the pilgrimages to the Holy Places—the most renowned of which in the Middle Ages were Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago de Compostela and Canterbury—involves journeys, often dangerous and of great difficulty, to the sacred centres of the faith, as sources of spiritual renewal and as actual embodiments of the divine presence.9

The Christian pilgrimage shares many of the features of the pilgrimage as found in most of the world’s faiths. The most important general feature is that the pilgrimage is concerned in one form or another with perfection. In journeying to a sacred shrine, or simply journeying, the pilgrim seeks an image of perfection. This may be evoked by the life of a saint, or by God himself, seen as inhabiting the sacred places, or appearing himself in the guise of a wanderer, a pilgrim on earth. Contact with the relic, or the place, or simply with other pilgrims on the journey, in some measure recreates the holy life. Shrines and holy places contain “sacred traces” that bring to mind the highest ideals of the religious life. The pilgrim for the time participates in this purified life, and is inspired to continue it further, to “bring it back home” (spiritually or, sometimes, literally in the taking home of a sacred object from the shrine). In any case “it is the pursuit of the ideal that defines the sacred journey” (Morinis, 2).10

The pilgrimage occurs at the intersection of everyday life and the ideal. It is a meeting of the human and the divine. This is the second important feature of the pilgrimage. The pilgrim is a stranger, an alien or exile in a foreign country (from Latin peregre, “in a foreign place,” peregrinus, “foreign,” “an alien or foreigner”). He is not at home in this world. In embarking on a pilgrimage, the pilgrim seeks to move from the routine, the everyday, the imperfect, to a sacred realm beyond, his true home, where things are made good and holy. Pilgrimage places become assimilated to non-earthly realms: Jerusalem, the holy city, the city of God; Vrndavana, the celestial city. In the idea of the pilgrimage of life, the pilgrim is a temporary sojourner on this earth, journeying to a destination beyond this earth. “Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews, 13:14). Christians, says the second-century Epistle to Diognetus, “pass their days on earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven.” John Bunyan writes of “the pilgrim’s progress from this world, to that which is to come.” In all these conceptions, pilgrimage involves a journey from a mundane realm of time and place to a sphere beyond time and place. The pilgrimage annuls space and time. (Davies 184–189). We might say that the pilgrimage, like utopia, replaces mundane space and time with spiritual (or utopian) space and time.

The parallel between the pilgrimage and the utopian journey is obvious.11 The journey to utopia also takes us to an ideal world beyond this
world—to a world that is, indeed, "nowhere," that exists beyond our boundaries of time and space. As with the pilgrimage, the utopian journey begins in history, with the here and now, but finds its fulfilment beyond it. Within utopia, too, the journey imitates the pilgrimage in its various forms. The traveller is generally taken on some tour of the country, culminating in his presence at some central institution or symbol of the new society, such as the House of Salomon in Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) or the order of the Samurai in Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905). Here the journey is, like the pilgrimage to a particular shrine or holy place, actual, appointed to a particular destination.

All utopian journeys, like all pilgrimages, are spiritual. But some are, as it were, more spiritual than others. Some utopian journeys are more akin to the "exilic" or "wandering" pilgrimages which have no fixed geographical goal but involve a more or less permanent wandering in quest of the ideal. These were common among the early Christians, and are also marked in the Buddhist tradition. In these cases, a profound dissatisfaction, a sense of alienation from the present, inspires a going forth, with no sense of a predestined point of arrival. The pilgrim sets out in hope, no more. The journey is all.

In the history of utopia journeys of the second kind increasingly come to accompany, though not displace, the first. Partly owing to the development of the literary form of utopia (itself a reflection of the growing sophistication of the novel), the utopian journey comes to take on more of a "sentimental" character. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) may be important both for its "interiorization of the pilgrimage" and for its possible influence on conceptions of the utopian journey, at least in England. At any rate, as in the *Bildungsroman*, the utopian journey increasingly comes to involve a quest for identity. It chronicles an education of the emotions, a search for the ideal through the self-transformation of the hero or narrator. Necessarily this gives the utopia a more tentative and experimental character—sometimes even a fragmentary one. There is an "unfinished" quality to it that is in keeping with the exploratory nature of the journey: a journey that is unsure partly of its goal, partly of its ability to achieve it. The utopias of William Morris and, I would argue, H.G. Wells are very much of this type.

I would not want to insist too much on this historical succession. Both types of utopian journey continue in being alongside each other—both can sometimes be found within the same utopia (as in *A Modern Utopia*). The more important thing indeed, from the point of view of our present concern, is the recovery and rehabilitation of the utopian journey as such, as a type of pilgrimage. This came after a period of its virtual disappearance. The utopias of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries follow the pilgrimage pattern closely. This is partly because they do not seek for the realization of their ideal societies on earth. They are largely exercises in philosophic contemplation, ways of exploring moral and political ideals. With the eighteenth century came the idea that utopia could be made real, on earth, in our time. Utopia entered the realm of "scientific" social science. It was incorporated in schemes for the scientific reorganization of society and the liberation of
humanity. The utopian journey, if it existed at all, was merely a convenient fiction for promulgating such schemes of reform.\footnote{12}

It was against this conception of utopia that the reaction took place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. \textit{News from Nowhere} belongs to that phase. The utopian journey was resumed with a new vigour, and a new consciousness of the possibilities of the form. Indeed one might argue that, in the new phase, the journey itself took on a new importance. It became the vehicle for conveying the central idea of the utopia. The distinction—never in any case absolute—between the journey to utopia, and the journey in utopia, breaks down. In a real sense, the journey becomes utopia.

\textbf{‘The Clear Thames Bordered By Its Gardens Green’:}

\textbf{Morris’s Utopian Journey}

There is no evidence that Morris was specifically interested in pilgrimages. He does list John Bunyan’s \textit{The Pilgrim’s Progress} (as well as \textit{The Canterbury Tales}) among his favourite books (May Morris, xvi). That is, of course, no more than might be expected from any educated—or, for that matter, uneducated—Englishman of his time. But it does not seem to have been noticed that there are some striking similarities between \textit{The Pilgrim’s Progress} and \textit{News from Nowhere}. Not only are both couched in the form of a dream. The way Bunyan’s book opens, with the portrait of a restless and tormented figure crying, “What shall I do to be saved?”, is strongly reminiscent of the opening pages of \textit{News from Nowhere}, with its discontented and unhappy narrator also praying for a vision of a better world. The endings too echo each other. There is William Guest’s despair at being shut out from the feast at the old house, and his misery on awakening in his own times. Similarly Bunyan’s narrator, describing the triumphant entry of Christian and Hopeful into the Celestial City, feels a sense of loss and exclusion when the gates of the city are shut, and exclaims: “which when I had seen, I wished myself among them” (204).

As for Chaucer’s book, no more need be noted than what might be aptly described as a Chaucerian atmosphere of good humour and good cheer surrounding many of the scenes in \textit{News from Nowhere}, amplified by the generally medieval setting of Morris’s tale. Pilgrimage, by the time Chaucer was writing, had increasingly come to take on a festive air; the holiday mood, the delight in life and nature, of \textit{The Canterbury Tales} finds a distinct echo in \textit{News from Nowhere}.

It is not, however, necessary to look for any particular interest in pilgrimages or pilgrimage literature on Morris’s part. His passion for the Icelandic sagas and the medieval romances sufficiently attests his fascination with the journey and the quest. His own romances nearly all figure such a journey. In \textit{News from Nowhere}, I want to suggest, the journey along the Thames carries the main meaning of Morris’s utopian vision. It is a journey with many of the features of a pilgrimage.\footnote{13}

The structure of the journey in \textit{News from Nowhere} can be expressed, admittedly somewhat crudely, in the following diagram. It is based on the
two main journeys made by William Guest in the book. The first journey takes place in London. From his starting point at the Hammersmith Guest House on the Thames in west London, William travels in an easterly direction more or less following the line of the river. In the last part of the book William and his friends make their second journey, the journey up the Thames. The first journey ends with the long conversations with Old Hammond in the British Museum. The second ends at the old house near the source of the Thames. Both journeys start at the Hammersmith Guest House, which is on the site of Morris’s own house on the Thames, Kelmscott House. The old house, preserved from the past, at which the second journey ends, is clearly Morris’s other Thameside house, Kelmscott Manor.

The two journeys have, analytically speaking, different functions in Morris’s account of utopia. They indicate different dimensions. The first we might describe as “urban-intellectual.” William’s first journey is through the city. He sees what a city could be truly like, shorn of its industrial and commercial excrescences. There are beautiful bridges across the Thames. The houses, which remind William of the fourteenth century both from their style and the materials of their construction, are set among gardens and woods. The city is dotted with gay open-air markets, enclosing handsome Mote-Houses or town-halls. There is also much use of the covered arcade, as with the group of shops in Piccadilly where William does some shopping, and which reminds him of the design of “some of the old Italian cities.”

The urban journey also serves to introduce William to the arts and crafts of the new society. Part of the art of the new society is in the design of the very people, who are comely and healthy and able to preserve their looks and vigour to a ripe old age. Their clothes too are pretty, brightly-coloured and finely made by hand, as in medieval times. The same concern with the aesthetic as much as the utilitarian function of objects is shown in
the gaily embroidered Morocco tobacco pouch and elaborately carved pipe
which William receives from the child assistants of the Piccadilly shop.
Later, in the handsome communal dining hall in Bloomsbury he is struck by
the wealth of carvings, the beautiful but not over-refined furniture, and the
gay frieze that decorates the walls. The food too is simple, "though so
excellent of its kind," and is served on beautifully ornamented crockery
made of sturdy materials.

With the meeting with Old Hammond in the British Museum we come
to the intellectual heart of the new society. Here William learns of the ways
and means of the new order, and how it came into being. There is some gentle
fun-poking at the garrulous old man, and Morris also takes the opportunity
to satirize the old-style utopian dialogue, with its stiff question-and-answer
form (see especially chapter 11, "Concerning Government"). But overall
there is no doubting the seriousness of this long section (it occupies almost
forty percent of the book).

Morris is sometimes accused of evasiveness and a certain culpable
casualness in his description of the new society. This is a result often of the
culpable casualness on the part of his readers—indeed so careless are some
that, like his early biographer Aymer Vallance, they can assert that "Morris
affords us no details of the period of transition, but goes straight to the ulti-
mate outcome" (347). Where Morris is vague this "vagueness," as I have
suggested, is studied. Even in William's conversations with Old Hammond,
there is a good deal of playfulness and a somewhat breezy manner, as in the
banter about Oxford University and in the discussions about what the world
knows as "politics" and to Morris meant hot air and power hunger.

But in the discussions with Old Hammond the matter is mostly sober
and detailed enough. Morris gives the fullest account of those things that he
thought important: the relations between men and women, the character of
work, and the balance between urban and rural life. Other matters, such as
political arrangements, are treated more cursorily. Throughout, in any case,
it is stressed that what matters most are not institutions but the habits of
mind and body generated in the people by their whole way of life, as daily
lived. "We have," as Old Hammond puts it, "been living for a hundred and
fifty years, at least, more or less in our present manner, and a tradition or
habit of life has been growing on us... That is... the foundation of our
life and happiness" (News from Nowhere, 67).

In one matter there is no vagueness at all. That is in the account of
the political revolution that brought the new society into being. Here Morris
gives a quite brilliant sketch of the form of a possible socialist revolution in
England. On the question of the transition to the new society, there is noth-
ing else like it in the utopian literature. What we get, in the space of twenty-
five or so pages ("How the Change Came"), is nothing less than a complete
"natural history" of revolution, incorporating elements of 1789, 1830, 1848
and 1871—the principal revolutions up to Morris's time—and looking
ahead to 1917, 1926 (the British General Strike), and even 1933 and 1936.
It is a virtuoso performance, linking the movements and ideas of Morris's
own time with a sweeping projection into a future, some fifty years from that time, when the socialist revolution finally triumphs.

Anyone who thinks that Morris has a misty-eyed or soft-headed view of the socialist utopia should study this section especially carefully. It shows a realism and a mastery of historical theorizing as powerful as anything to be found in his political essays or in such works as *Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome* (1893, with Belfort Bax). There is an intellectual core to Morris's utopianism that is frequently missed in the accounts that like to stress his romanticism. Morris was indeed a romantic, in the literary sense of that term; but as Thompson and Meier both show in their different ways, he was also a clear-sighted revolutionary with an impressive grasp of socialist theory and a no less impressive knowledge of history. He often disguises this, with a characteristically English display of bluntness and self-deprecation. But for careful readers it is as plain to see in *News from Nowhere* as in any other of his writings.

In his first journey in utopia, then, to a place that stores and a person who keeps the memory of the great change, William Guest comes to an intellectual understanding of the new society. He—and we—learn that change is possible, if not inevitable; there may need to be much struggle, some of it bloody; but socialism is on the agenda of modern society.

William's second journey is up the Thames. I have called this "rural-emotional." It is, again, a crude term but it makes the point well enough. William now sees something of the country, and the country life, of the new society. He is also drawn into an increasingly intense emotional involvement with its ways and its people. This leads to a new form of education—an education, we might say, of the senses and the feelings. He begins to think he could truly live in the new society, radically different as it is from the one he has left behind. He has achieved an intellectual understanding. He can see, in an objective way, the appeal and the strengths of the new society. But he feels distinctly uncomfortable in it—even his old-fashioned clothes make him a curiosity. Now—symbolically dressed in fine new clothes more suited to the society—he gains the confidence that he might after all be able to adapt. Crucially this is helped by his finding at least one person who seems to understand him, not only intellectually but at an emotional level that is matched by his response to her.

It may be conventional to associate the city with the intellect, and the country with feelings. This is not, of course, what Morris actually does, as we shall see. But, precisely because of the traditional associations, it remains an effective device for conveying the different aspects of the new society, and the different levels at which it must be grasped. Stretching the point somewhat, we might say that if the first journey is predominantly "realistic," the second journey is predominantly "romantic."

It is even more difficult to summarize the second journey than the first. Although it occupies only the last third of the book it is densely textured and carries much, perhaps the greater part, of Morris's utopianism. There is much less dialogue than in the first journey, and far less explicit discus-
sion of ideas. The ideas, the “theory,” have been more or less adequately conveyed. Now comes the task of communicating the experience, the lived sense of being in a utopia.

It is in this part of the book that the dream-like quality of the journey is at its strongest. Not that the writing is lacking in concreteness, nor the vision. Morris is meticulous in his description of the river and its surrounding countryside. The different kinds of trees, birds and buildings along the riverside are precisely noted and commented on. The construction of the locks on the river is discussed, with William expressing his delight at the return of the simple wooden locks, turned by hand, instead of the machine-driven iron locks that had been displacing them in his own day. He is similarly pleased to see that “my old enemies the ‘Gothic’ cast-iron bridges had been replaced by handsome oak and stone ones.” It was indeed from the countryside, as Henry Morson explains, that the revival of handicraft took place.

Nor does Morris bathe the countryside in an overidealized Arcadian glow, in which all is leisure and pleasure. There is hard though pleasurable work done here, in haymaking and stone carving and house building. The country people are observed in detail, William being particularly struck by their intelligence and curiosity about the world around them, as compared with the dull and down-trodden country folk of his day. There is even tragedy in the countryside. It is here that we learn from Walter Allen of the death of a man in a lovers’ quarrel, and the suicidal melancholy that has overtaken his blameless killer.

What gives this section of the book its dreaminess, in a positive sense, is the sheer lyricism of the writing and the almost trance-like mood it evokes. We feel we are in a holy place. We are made to see the countryside as an emblem of utopia itself. Its beauty, the happiness and contentment it induces, has the power to regenerate and transform. As William journeys up the river, he feels his former diffidence and disquiet slipping away from him. He feels more vigorous and youthful—his friends say he actually looks more youthful—and more equipped to come to terms with the strange new world he has entered. He is less and less like the “being from another planet” that he feels himself to be in Old Hammond’s presence, and more and more like a citizen of the new society. The river journey is achieving a transformation at the personal, psychological level that completes the intellectual understanding of the first journey. William is acutely aware of this change in himself. He notes that “the strangeness and excitement” of the happy life that he saw everywhere was beginning to wear off. “A deep content, as different as possible from languid acquiescence, was taking its place, and I was, as it were, really new-born” (News from Nowhere, 141).

In an unguarded moment, William boasts to Ellen, as he manfully rows her along the upper reaches of the Thames: “I know these reaches well; indeed, I may say that I know every yard of the Thames from Hammersmith to Cricklade” (News from Nowhere, 158). It is an unfortunate remark, coming from a traveller from a distant land who, although he says he once visited the lower Thames, should certainly have no knowledge of the upper river.
However, it is shown to have a happy outcome, as it is the prelude to William’s confession to Ellen that he is actually a visitor from the past, and this in turn leads to a deeper bond between them. Its significance in their developing relationship mirrors its significance in the journey as a whole. It underlines the intensely personal nature of the second journey. It is as if Morris, writing about his beloved Thames, cannot hold back his feeling of sheer bliss, which bursts forth as it were uncontrollably and disrupts the fiction of the utopian narrative. The fiction is then resumed by making the incident stand as a turning point in the relationship between William and Ellen. Here the identification of William Morris and William Guest is more or less complete. The Thames had always been for Morris a “utopian” refuge from the ugliness and oppression of his society. He was especially fond of the lesser known upper river, the section leading to Kelmscott Manor. The unthinking impulse that forces William’s unguarded utterance while on the upper reaches, and the consequences that flow from it, are an indication of the way the river journey is preparing him for full entry into the new world.

This entry, in the narrative, is accomplished largely through Ellen, the central figure of the second journey, as Old Hammond is of the first. Ellen belongs to the river and the country; she seems to grow out of them. At one level, with her tanned face and hands, her singing and dancing, she is real enough, both to William and to us. At another level she is portrayed as an ethereal, almost sprite-like figure, an ideal incarnation of the new age. She is described as a “fairy,” with a “strange wild beauty.” She goes barefooted and lightly clad, and sings in a “sweet shrill” voice. Both from her looks and the things she says, she is the fullest embodiment of the new society that we encounter—“the fairy godmother,” William calls her, the one who makes everything good and everyone happy.

William is powerfully aware of the difference “this strange girl” from the others. “I must say that of all the persons I had seen in that world renewed she was the most unfamiliar to me, the most unlike what I could have thought of.” He admires Dick’s girlfriend, Clara, for her beauty and her healthy outlook on life. But she and the other women William has so far met are simply “specimens of very much improved types which I had known in other times.” Ellen is different in kind; and the difference lies not so much in the way she looks or what she does as in what she is, what her whole being represents.

This girl was not only beautiful with a beauty quite different from that of “a young lady,” but was in all ways so strangely interesting; so that I kept wondering what she would say or do next to surprise and please me. Not, indeed, that there was anything startling in what she actually said or did; but it was all done in a new way, and always with that indefinable interest and pleasure of life, which I had noticed more or less in everybody, but which in her was more marked and more charming than in anyone else that I had seen (News from Nowhere, 157).

Ellen seems almost to initiate William into the new world as a master initiates a novice in a masonic society or a religious order. That is putting it
too strongly. Ellen does not take so leading or active a role; the initiation is the result of the whole journey, indeed of both journeys. But the emotional pivot of that initiation can fairly be said to be the intensifying relation between William and Ellen, which reaches a climax in their courtship—no other word seems appropriate—as they approach their destination, the old house high up the river, close to its source. In falling in love with Ellen, William falls in love with the new society. His disappointment at his final banishment from it is the disappointment of a lover who has lost the object of his love.

As the lovers approach their goal, there is a growing sense of excitement and expectation—also, on William’s part, of apprehension. Morris’s writing creates an atmosphere of hushed breathlessness. The river and the landscape about have a loveliness almost too great to be spoken of. This is a truly holy place (as we know Kelmscott Manor was for Morris). It is significant that what William describes, as he and Ellen approach the house, are not the details of the building but the gardens and grounds surrounding it—a whole space filled with beauty. Quotations from this final section are less helpful than normal; the whole of the last three chapters have to be read. But the following passage gives something of the flavour:

We crossed the road, and again almost without my will my hand raised the latch of a door in the wall, and we stood presently on a stone path which led up to the old house. . . . My companion gave a sigh of pleased surprise and enjoyment; nor did I wonder, for the garden between the wall and the house was redolent of the June flowers, and the roses were rolling over one another with that delicious super-abundance of small well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save that of beauty. The blackbirds were singing their loudest, the doves were cooing on the roof-ridge, the rooks in the high elm trees beyond were garulous among the young leaves, and the swifts wheeled whining about the gables. And the house itself was a fit guardian for all the beauty of this heart of summer (News from Nowhere, 173–174).

It is the scene that Morris chose as the illustration for the frontispiece to the Kelmscott Press edition of News from Nowhere. It is well chosen. Here is the climax and culmination of the whole journey. The pilgrimage has ended. The sacred place has been attained. The journey has followed a movement further and further away from the mundane world. It starts with William, miserable and frustrated in his old world. It continues with the dramatic shift to the new world. Within that world, the journey grows steadily in pace and emotional intensity as it moves from the town to the country. Once on the river—itself, like other natural sources of water, commonly a pilgrimage place in many religions—the journey acquires an increasingly sacred character. Its goal, the old house, is a distillation, a magnification of the ideals of the new society, as is the case with other pilgrimage centres. It is a carrier of the “sacred trace,” the ideal made visible and palpable (Preston, 41; Morinis, 18).

Ellen remarks of the old house, built long before the great change, that “it seems to me as if it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the
gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past." The old house, that is, is a utopian anticipation, a promise almost, of a happier future. Now that happiness has become universal, the house still stands as a sacred symbol of the good life. When Ellen embraces one of its old walls, it speaks to her of all that she and her kind value in their way of life, and she exclaims:

O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it—as this has done! (News from Nowhere, 174).

Reassessment

I have exaggerated, for the purposes of argument, a number of things in this essay. Morris would not have been pleased at my division into "urban" and "rural," still less "intellectual" and "emotional." Neither in his own life, nor in his thinking, did he make these kinds of divisions. The good life for him (as for Marx) involved a fusion of all these elements. Mental would be merged with manual, mind with body and feeling, town with country. "I want," he said, "the town to be impregnated with the beauty of the country, and the country with the intelligence and vivid life of the town" (Mackail II: 305–306).

All this is clear in News from Nowhere. Kensington, we remember, is "a wild spot"; it is covered by a large wood, almost a forest, joining up with Epping Forest in the east. Trafalgar Square is a cleared open space, planted with an orchard of apricot trees. The city is throughout warrened with small woods, gardens and clearings. The countryside has indeed invaded the city. The people too are far from being slick urban types. Dick and Clara are hardly dessicated intellectuals, nor even does Old Hammond show a lack of feeling.

As for the country, Old Hammond tells how, after the change, "people flocked into the country villages"; "the town invaded the country." "The difference between town and country grew less and less; and it was indeed the world of the country vivified by the thought and briskness of town-bred folk which has produced that happy and leisurely but eager life . . ." (News from Nowhere, 60–61). The country towns and villages are thriving centres of handicraft production. "Force barges," driven by some nameless but clearly advanced source of power, ply the Thames. The country people are, as we have noted, alert and intelligent. Certainly there is no lack of intellectual curiosity or perspicacity in the country people we encounter—Walter Allen, Henry Morson, and of course Ellen.

So the distinctions I have made in my account of the journey in News from Nowhere are for analytical purposes only, no more. They are, I think, useful; but after the exercise has been done the parts have clearly to be put together again. News from Nowhere is indeed all of a piece—more so, perhaps, than any other utopia.

As for the journey itself, that too is only one way of reading a utopia, News from Nowhere not excepted. The utopian form lends itself to a wide variety of approaches; that is one of its many attractions. But I would claim
that the journey is a particularly fruitful way of approaching *News from Nowhere*. It clearly interested Morris deeply, deeply enough for him to use it in many of his works. It was a central ingredient of the romances and sagas that preoccupied him throughout his life.

More to the point, the journey seems to be clearly implicated in the whole structure of *News from Nowhere*. That is most powerfully indicated by the importance of the River Thames, which literally runs like a silver thread through this utopia. The river is a living presence throughout, even in the urban scenes. Movement up and down it accounts for a large part of the narrative of the book. Many of the critical incidents and events take place upon it. Above all, especially in the crucial last section, it carries the emotional weight of the utopia. The journey by road to the British Museum—though the river is often visible—brings us to the reason, the “head,” of utopia; the river journey is a journey to the heart of utopia.

What, finally, of the journey as pilgrimage? Again the pilgrimage is only one kind of utopian journey. But I have argued that the change in the conception of utopia in the later nineteenth century made the idea of pilgrimage a particularly suitable one. The utopian journey now increasingly took on the character of a personal quest for salvation. Very few utopian writers ever considered this purely in terms of psychology; change in the individual was seen as contingent on change in society. But the emphasis was increasingly thrown on the individual. The search for utopia, the striving after it, was increasingly expressed in terms of individual desire, as the individual sought to escape a situation of alienation and oppression that was as much personal as it was social and political.

This was clearly Morris’s own position. No one could have been more aware of the need for political, indeed revolutionary, change as the precondition for individual salvation. But Morris’s whole case against Bellamy was that he was concerned with change in “the mere machinery of life,” and ignored the human and personal transformation that must necessarily accompany any true movement to socialism. *News from Nowhere* blends, in the most satisfying way of any utopia so far, the personal and the political.

The political revolution that brought in the great change is described in great detail. That too is seen not as an abrupt shift, a mere mechanical overthrowing of one system by another, but a long-drawn-out process lasting over more than half a century of struggle. There has to be a “change beyond the change.” It is an educative process, a process in which, often through bitter lessons, society learns how finally to remake itself in such a way that everyone can find their fulfillment in it.

The personal change also needs education. William Guest’s journey to and in utopia is a rehearsal of just such a process of education. The “stranger from another planet” achieves, like the new society he has come to, a “second birth.” As he learns the new ways, learns it not just by his reason but by his heart and through his senses, he is changed to the point where he believes he can now live in this wonderful but strange new world. Like the pilgrim, he is changed as much by the journey itself as by the
journey's goal. But the goal, the sacred place, sets the seal on the transformation. Once arrived at the old house, he has truly come home—to the home where he really belongs, in that "other world," not in his old unhappy world. And when he cruelly finds himself back in that world, he does not entirely despair. For having seen the new world, he knows now how to face the scepticism and pessimism of his own. He knows that "there is yet a time of rest in store for the world" (News from Nowhere, 182).

NOTES

*I should like to thank the three anonymous referees of Utopian Studies for their helpful comments.

1. Abensour's account is contained in his unpublished doctoral thesis. Two articles draw upon this (Abensour, 1974, 1981). For discussions of Abensour in English (most focusing on Morris), see E.P. Thompson (786–794); Anderson (157–175); Levitas (116–130).

2. See Morris's review, "Looking Backward." For a discussion, see Kumar (Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times, 161–167); see also Geoghegan.

3. A contemporary reviewer (in The Idler) of Morris's prose romances wrote of The Wood Beyond the World and News from Nowhere that they were "two of the loveliest fairytales ever written" ( Vallance, 373). Vallance's account of the reception of these romances makes it clear that many contemporaries treated News from Nowhere as part of the whole sequence (347, 366–375).

See generally Silver on what she calls Morris's "socialist romances"; for a fine study of one of the romances, indicating the connections with News from Nowhere, see Calhoun. The romance has often, especially in later centuries, taken pastoral form, as in Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia (1590) and H.G. Wells's The History of Mr. Polly (1910).

4. On the romance, ancient and modern, see Abrams (1993, 25–26, 125–129). Abrams has elsewhere also shown how, in 19th century Romanticism, the romance became the vehicle of a powerful regeneration—in secular form—of Christian themes of the pilgrim's quest and the return to the spiritual home (Natural Supernaturalism 1971, 141–324).

5. Cf. Geoghegan: "Morris builds into his fantasy his own selective appreciation of the past, and universalizes his strong likes and dislikes" (87). See also Maurice Hewlett's review of News from Nowhere, where he remarks "that the interest of paper paradises is mainly biographical . . . When we have read News from Nowhere we lay it slowly down . . . with mingled feelings containing this little substratum of comfort, that now at least we know Mr Morris" (343–344).

6. Jan Marsh, while disappointed at Morris's portrayal of women News from Nowhere, nevertheless notes "the erotic thrust" of the whole work, and sees this as some compensation (124–125).

In his account of "the pleasure of work" in the new society, Old Hammond justifiably refers back to Fourier, "whom all men laughed at." The eroticization of work is linked to the larger eroticization of the world as it undergoes its "second birth": "The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world, intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves . . ." (News from Nowhere, 78, 112–113). Ellen, the fullest expression of the new spirit, most clearly symbolizes this erotic attachment to the world.

7. Nearly all the contributors to Coleman and O'Sullivan stress the ecological descent; see especially, O'Sullivan. See also Gould. The feminist descent, in such works as Ursula Le Guin's The Dispossessed (1974), is of course more a matter of the literary treatment of utopia than of any ideological inheritance—except in so far as the feminist utopia overlaps ecotopia.
8. See Godinho. And cf. Adriana Corrado: “Without Columbus utopia itself would never have been born.”

9. Jacques Le Goff speaks of the “homo viator, man the voyager, always travelling on this earth and through this life span,” as one of the principal conceptions of “the Christian anthropology” of the Middle Ages. “Man of the Middle Ages was a pilgrim, by his nature and by vocation, and in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries he was a crusader, the highest and most perilous earthly form of a pilgrim” (7). See also Gurevich (74–74). A good general account of the Christian idea and practice of pilgrimage through the ages is Davies (see especially 184–201).

10. On the idea of the “sacred trace,” see Preston (40–41). In addition to the essays in Morris (Sacred Journeys), see for the general features of pilgrimages Turner (Process) and Turner and Turner (Image and Pilgrimage). See also Reader and Walter. David Lodge’s novel, Paradise News (1991), is a rather unsatisfactory attempt to treat the promising theme of tourism as a form of pilgrimage. Helpful on this is Cohen.

11. It is impossible to enter here into the question of how far utopia was actually influenced by the pilgrimage ideal. It is part of the larger question of the relation between Christianity—or religion in general—and utopia. For the record it is interesting that Thomas More, in his Dialogue Against Heresies (1528), conducted a defence of the pilgrimage against the attacks of Luther (but then, we might say, he would, wouldn’t he?). More significant, for the English utopia at any rate, is the general influence of John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress (1678) on English literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

12. For this sketch of the history of utopia, see further Kumar (Utopia and Anti-Utopia, 33–68).

13. It is curious but nonetheless true that the one of Morris’s works that actually uses the word pilgrim in its title—the narrative poem The Pilgrims of Hope (1885–86)—makes relatively little use of the pilgrimage concept. It involves a journey of kinds—from the country to the town (London), and from England to France to join the Communards of Paris during the rising of the Commune (1870–71)—but the journey has few of the features associated with a pilgrimage. Nevertheless the very title indicates something of the appeal of the idea of pilgrimage to Morris. For a discussion—generally critical—of the poem, see E.F. Thompson (669–673).

14. I couldn’t agree less with John Crump’s view that Morris’s account of the revolution is “unconvincing, contradictory and insufficiently thought out” (57). Crump’s discussion generally seems to me obtuse. He accuses Morris of, among other things, misunderstanding “State Socialism,” being too kind to union leaders, and believing in “socialism in one country.” The whole criticism evidently comes from the pen of a dogmatic and die-hard Trotskyist.

15. The complexities of even this traditional distinction are well explored in Williams.

16. Which is why it was unforgiveable to leave it out of the abridgement of News from Nowhere contained in the well-known selection by Briggs.

17. Jan Marsh also notes that Ellen is “the most ideal representative of the new society” and “the personification of the new age” (121, 124).

18. For Morris’s love of Kelmscott Manor, and its meaning to him, see Mackail (1:231–246). Mackail writes: “For the twenty-five years during which this beautiful old house was his country home, he found in it a peace and joy that no other place gave him, and his attachment to it became more and more deep—one may boldly say more and more passionate; for with him the love of things had all the romance and passion that is generally associated with the love of persons only. ‘It has come to be to me,’ he wrote in 1882, ‘the type of the pleasantest places of the earth, and of the homes of harmless simple people not overburdened with the intricacies of life; and as others love the race of man through their lovers or their children, so I love the earth through that small space of it’” (231).

19. This triumphant entry, to a chorus of bird song, once more echoes the entry of Christian and Hopeful to the Celestial City in The Pilgrim’s Progress.
20. It is worth noting that Morris's final work, The Sundering Flood (1896) also involves a journey along—though not on—a mighty river. The journey is in the familiar form of a quest, in which a young knight searches for his lost love, and his own destiny. The medievalism of the setting, in both town and country, recalls News from Nowhere at several points (as well, of course, as others of Morris's romances). A contemporary reviewer noted "the family likeness in his ideal landscape": "It is the picture of such a vision as could well be entertained by a man of the experience of William Morris, who might easily dream his favourite Cotswolds into 'the Great Mountains' of the story, and add thereto torrents and steadings, and eke it out from that other chamber of remembrance where lay his early days in Essex and Epping Forest, and his knowledge of the broad lower Thames." Unsigned review of The Sundering Flood, Academy, 19 March 1898 (Faulkner, 427).

21. On this see generally P. Thompson (258-272).

22. The same image of a second birth occurs in The Pilgrims of Hope: "I was born once long ago; I am born again tonight" (Morton, 138).

REFERENCES


